

2001 CENSUS FIELD OPERATIONS REPORT**Summary**

- 1 The Field Operations phase of the 2001 Census in England and Wales has effectively closed. The overall view is that this phase of the Census went generally well – in some aspects better than could have been hoped for, in others less perhaps.
- 2 Plans for the evaluation of the methodology and procedures are underway with input from both HQ and field staff. Lessons learned will be used as the basis for the strategic evaluation and development programme for any future census.
- 3 This paper briefly reports on several aspects of the field operation highlighting the successes enjoyed and the difficulties encountered.

Action

- 4 **Advisory Group Members are invited to note the report and the plans and timetable for evaluation.**

Postback

- 5 Postal response far exceeded expectations, in fact it could be described as overwhelming – literally so for field staff having to cope with a huge mailbag in some areas. The final post-back response was estimated to have been 88 per cent; this far exceeded the level of around 70 per cent anticipated on the basis of recent international experience (in last year's US Census for example the Bureau of the Census only achieved a return of 72 per cent by post).
- 6 A further 7 per cent of returns were collected by field staff in the follow-up exercise, which was extended in some areas, and ONS estimate that 3 per cent of forms were delivered to addresses which were either vacant dwellings or second residences. On the basis of these figures ONS estimate that the final overall response will be at least as good as in the 1991 Census.
- 7 Response in Wales was estimated to have been slightly better than in England overall despite the publicity given in the Welsh press to the Independent Wales Party's campaign to boycott the census because of the Welsh tick box issue.
- 8 The claims previously made by the IWP that they had collected thousands of forms from the so called 'refusniks' were put into perspective in a letter from the party's Chief Executive John Humphries in August when he assured the Registrar General that the IWP was not holding any such forms.

- 9 The better than expected postbag did, however, create some difficulties in itself in some parts of the country, particularly in London and in those areas more seriously affected by postal flow problems within the Royal Mail, and where the completion of the pick-up of forms was delayed.

Recruitment

- 10 Recruitment of the 70,000 temporary field staff was more difficult than had been the case in 1991, primarily because of a far more competitive employment market, and this was particularly so in London. However, at the Area and District Manager levels ONS feels that it managed to appoint staff with a greater range of skills and experience than previously.
- 11 The teamwork approach using field staff far more flexibly, developed in the 1999 Rehearsal, certainly appeared to work well, and reaction to the training programme and package was good. However, levels of staff turnover, particularly among District Managers and Enumerators proved to be higher than in 1991, possibly as a result of the higher than expected workloads imposed this time.
- 12 In helping to overcome these difficulties ONS have appreciated the help and support given by authorities, particularly London boroughs, in readily making staff available to work on the Census.

Foot and Mouth outbreak

- 13 The foot and mouth crises certainly presented a challenging environment in which to conduct the Census. However, the teams in those areas seriously affected by the outbreak seemed to work very well to overcome the difficulties imposed by the restrictions.
- 14 The Census Office co-ordinated its arrangements with MAFF, the National Farmers' Union and the National Assembly for Wales, and received regular reports on the situation across the country as the outbreak developed. Response to the Census in rural areas is traditionally very high, and there is no evidence to date to suggest that response rates in such areas were seriously affected in reaction to the crisis. Moreover, there were few reports of complaints from members of the public and the farming community even in those areas most badly hit.

Community Liaison Programme

- 15 The Community Liaison Programme must be regarded as one of the major successes of the 2001 Census in helping to target the traditionally hard-to-enumerate sections of the population.
- 16 It provided a particularly useful function by facilitating the provision of the census questions and instruction leaflet in 26 foreign languages, two of which were introduced at a late stage in the programme in response to requirements identified in the field.
- 17 The provision of census material in Braille and other formats to assist the enumeration of the disabled was also the result of close co-operation between the Community

Liaison Team and the RNIB and other interested bodies and organisations. It was all the more disappointing, therefore, that misunderstandings between ONS and the RNIB over the lack of provision of census forms in alternative formats created so much negative publicity around Census day.

Publicity and the Helpline

- 18 The publicity campaign itself should also be regarded successful – perhaps too much so in that it helped to create an unprecedented demand on the telephone Helpline.
- 19 Coverage of the Census was, in the main, positive and helpful in the national press but particularly so locally, where Census Area Managers played a vital role in widely promoting the benefits and value of the Census. And even in Wales, where the coverage tended to be more acerbic, the Census was given extensive exposure. There could have been few parts of the country or sectors of the community unaware, in April, that a Census was taking place.
- 20 As a result the response to the Helpline was far in excess of what had been anticipated and planned for on the basis of the US experience in 2000, when the Bureau of the Census received around 2 million calls. In the event some two and half million calls were received from across the UK, with as many as a quarter of a million on one day alone – more than had been received throughout the 1991 Census altogether.
- 21 There were initial difficulties for members of the public getting through, but these were rectified as soon as the problem emerged, and the contractors Cable and Wireless promptly expanded the team to over 1,000 operatives in an attempt to improve the flow of calls.
- 22 Many calls were made, it should be acknowledged, because of the late delivery of forms in some areas because of particular local difficulties and because of the increased public awareness of the Census itself. Additional arrangements were put in place to despatch forms to households direct from the Helpline centres where this was necessary.
- 23 Levels of complaint about the content of the form itself or about the census in general were proportionately few.

Field Management

- 24 The Field Management Information System, which was intended to provide up to date communication between the field and HQ, was, in the event, not always as helpful as it might have been. It may have been optimistic to have expected the system to have produced high quality information on a consistent basis across the country. Both the technology itself and the training in the use of such, are areas that the evaluation programme will be looking at closely.

Pay

- 25 Ironically, arguably the biggest problem encountered in the Census, was not directly concerned with the data collection aspect of the field operation but centred on

resolving the difficulties in processing the pay claims of a percentage of the field staff. Though the bulk of the field force was paid in full and to schedule, there were major problems encountered in settling a significant proportion of claims.

- 26 The difficulties were well publicised and the Registrar General took a close personal interest in seeing that the outstanding claims were settled as speedily as possible. Additional resources were put into resolving the queries and it should be noted that all but a small handful of cases are now completed. Compensation was paid in those cases where no payment at all had been made by particular dates.
- 27 There were a number of reasons for the difficulties experienced not least were the design and variety of the claims forms themselves, which manifested itself in both how well they were completed by field staff and how well they were processed by ONS contracted suppliers. This work had been contracted out as the result of the review of the procedures followed in the 1991 Census, but this is clearly an area where it will be vital to learn further lessons from the 2001 experience.

Evaluation

- 28 Paper AG(01)09 describes generally the ONS plans to evaluate the several aspects of the 2001 Census operation and to report findings as part of the proposed *General Report*.
- 29 Evaluation of the field operation activities is underway and is already considering aspects such as publicity, recruitment and the Community Liaison Programme. As part of the review, de-briefings with a wide selection of field staff have taken place.
- 30 The evaluations of the Publicity and Data Collection Development Projects are due to be concluded by the end of this year, and that of the Data Collection Support Project by March 2002. The reports of these evaluations will duly be posted on the ONS website before forming an integral part of the *General Report*, which is planned to be published by mid 2003.

Action

- 31 **Advisory Group Members are invited to note the report and the plans and timetable for evaluation.**

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